United Nations A/57/578

General Assembly

Distr.: General
29 October 2002

Original: English

Fifty-seventh session
Agenda Item 21 (a)
Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of natural disasters, from relief to development

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report highlights some of the natural disaster management efforts being undertaken by the United Nations system. It provides examples of some of the work being carried out by the United Nations in cooperation with national and regional partners to help promote viable strategies that strengthen capacities to respond to and deal with the aftermath of natural disasters.

In stressing the fact that there has been a continued increase in natural disasters during the last decade, the report underlines the importance of eliminating future risks of natural hazards by integrating disaster reduction aspects when planning and implementing post-disaster activities. It also underlines the importance of incorporating vulnerability reduction activities as a key element in ensuring the successful transition from relief to development. It also recognizes the need to strengthen cooperation between the United Nations and the international community so that there is increased understanding of the link between disaster reduction and sustainable development planning.

* The report was delayed due to the need to obtain inputs from a variety of sources.

02-66732 (E) 041102

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 56/103 of 14 December 2001. It should be read in conjunction with the reports of the Secretary-General on strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations (A/57/77-E/2002/63), the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (A/57/190) and international cooperation to reduce the impact of the El Niño phenomenon (A/57/189).

2. Over the past decade the highly disturbing upward trend in the occurrence and impact of natural disasters and its underlying causes has gone unbroken. Statistics show that there was real growth in the occurrence of windstorms, earthquakes and drought in the closing decade of the twentieth century. Climatic changes caused by human activities are contributing to the rise in the number of natural disasters. Communities in many countries around the world are increasingly exposed to the risk of natural disasters by virtue of growing urbanization, insufficient environmental management and land-use planning, poverty and the failure to incorporate disaster reduction in development planning. This situation is particularly threatening for many countries where the vulnerability of societies exposed to risks from natural disasters has gone largely unchecked, which also poses a major threat to sustainable development, particularly for the poorer communities.

3. The report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (A/57/190) elaborates on achievements and challenges relating to the process of implementing disaster reduction on a global scale. One major obstacle that still needs to be addressed is the poor understanding by decision makers of the close link between disaster reduction principles as advocated by the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and sustainable, longer-term development planning. In the post-disaster recovery phase, it is particularly important to include vulnerability reduction measures into any development planning frameworks. This will contribute to the long-term reduction of damage and loss of life due to natural hazards.

II. Natural disaster response

4. The United Nations system has made marked progress in organizing and strengthening its capacity to respond to natural disasters. During the reporting period, the Emergency Relief Coordinator has continued to exercise his key functions of mobilizing and coordinating international assistance following natural disasters, as described in the annex to General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991. This has been carried out with the overall goal of ensuring that international aid is both swift and effective. In this respect, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs continuously evaluates and fine-tunes the response tools that it has developed over the years and put at the disposal of the international community. Such tools include the United Nations disaster assessment and coordination teams, the Military and Civil Defence Unit, the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, for which the Office acts as the secretariat, the regional disaster response advisers, the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot in Brindisi and the ReliefWeb web site (http://www.reliefweb.int).

5. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has extended its network of regional disaster response advisers by opening offices in India and South Africa. As a practical step for improved coordination, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office have developed a letter of understanding identifying key areas of collaboration between the UNDP regional disaster reduction programme and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs disaster response advisers.

6. United Nations disaster assessment and coordination team missions have continued to support the response to natural disasters during the reporting period. Missions were undertaken in seven countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bolivia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Nigeria, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey, as well as in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Refresher courses for the regional teams were held in Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and the Pacific, involving 29 developing countries. A large workshop on United Nations support for the coordination of humanitarian assistance in Central America was co-sponsored by the Pan American Health Organization of the World Health Organization and the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America. As the secretariat of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, the Field Coordination Support Section of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs helped to organize a simulation exercise for search and rescue teams in Asia and the Pacific, which involved nine countries and five international organizations.

III. Natural disaster reduction and mitigation

7. The emphasis on response capacity must be matched by a similar effort in the area of risk reduction. The fact remains that vulnerability to natural hazards has increased and is a serious constraint for the attainment of such Millennium development goals (see General Assembly resolution 55/2) as poverty reduction and environmental protection. Poorer societies and the international community at large have to face a second set of risks and hazards, namely, those created by unchecked development activities. These can often have a devastating impact on the environment and can have a negative effect on the development gains for which they were conceived. The message is clear: development planning at the local, national and international levels has to include risk analysis and reduction measures. One challenge for the United Nations system is to assist in and advocate for the development of a focused and coherent strategy on natural disasters, one that also takes into account disaster response and reduction considerations.

8. The inclusion of vulnerability reduction measures is important in the transition from the relief phase to the development phase because decisions taken at this juncture will have an impact on the course of development of the countries concerned. Failure to incorporate vulnerability reduction in the post-disaster development phase constitutes a sure basis for a future increase in vulnerability. This will in turn be conducive to widespread damage and loss of life when a community becomes faced with the same or a similar natural hazard. UNDP has seen the erosion of development gains in many of its programme countries due to natural disasters over the past year. In addition to large-scale events, such as the floods in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hurricane Michelle in Cuba and Jamaica and

the floods in Senegal, smaller events continue to affect developing countries, representing an invisible but relentless erosion of development gains.

9. On the basis of its mandate to strengthen national capacity for disaster preparedness, mitigation and prevention, and following the creation of the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery in 2001, UNDP continued to reinforce its efforts to strengthen disaster reduction capacity in some 60 programme countries. The programmes included building local capacity for disaster reduction in Jamaica and Nicaragua, strengthening early warning capacity in Guatemala and Honduras and developing a new national risk and disaster management system in Haiti. Other initiatives include strengthening national disaster offices in the English-speaking Caribbean countries, developing a regional strategy for disaster management for southern African countries that are members of the Southern African Development Community, addressing the reduction of flood risk in the Tisza River Basin (Hungary, Romania and Ukraine), addressing drought risks in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and building disaster management capacities in Albania and Timor-Leste. New disaster reduction capacity-building programmes are currently being designed in Nepal and the Sudan.

10. A number of UNDP country offices are also making use of lessons learned. In partnership with national Governments, UNDP is developing large-scale programmes to reduce vulnerability and disaster risk. For example, building on successful experiences of post-disaster recovery in Gujarat and Orissa, the Government of India and UNDP have agreed to include disaster risk and vulnerability reduction as one of four core areas of the 2003-2007 country cooperation framework and have designed a $20 million multi-year programme to significantly reduce disaster risk in the 50 most disaster-prone districts in India, which should be replicated in other high-risk countries.

11. Lessons learned in such a process can be applied to other countries to help minimize the impact of future disasters. In a concrete instance, the increasing use of space applications and data for disaster reduction, as recommended by the General Assembly, provides for analyses that can be shared with communities facing similar situations. These analyses can easily be collated into databases for future consultations. The United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, the Committee on Earth Observation Satellites and the inter-agency secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction are collaborating with other partners on the design of a global disaster management programme based on the use of satellite technology, particularly Earth observation techniques.

12. In support of the disaster management efforts of the United Nations system and the international community, the Central Register of Disaster Management Capacities continues to be expanded. At present, the register consists of eight directories containing data on available disaster management resources and capacities. They range from rosters of disaster management expertise and lists of emergency stockpiles and relief items to a host of emergency response services provided by national and international organizations. In response to the request of the General Assembly in paragraph 20 of its resolution 56/103, the Directory of Advanced Technologies for Disaster Response is currently being developed. To strengthen disaster mitigation efforts, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction has produced a preliminary version of a document entitled "Living with risk — a global review of disaster reduction", which is a compilation of information

on disaster risk-reduction initiatives and is intended for disaster management practitioners.

IV. Supporting regional disaster management efforts

13. The General Assembly, in its resolution 56/103, reaffirmed that disaster reduction formed an integral part of sustainable development strategies and needed to be considered in the development plans of all vulnerable countries and communities. This statement is particularly true in the case of the immediate post-disaster phase. Post-disaster recovery and development planning provide an invaluable opportunity for raising awareness and running risk and vulnerability assessment surveys and for factoring risk-reduction measures into forward-looking development policies. Both the Governments concerned and the relevant international organizations and programmes should seize this opportunity in order to factor risk-reduction criteria into existing planning tools and programming frameworks.

14. In order to achieve its capacity-building mandate, UNDP has continued to strengthen its partnerships with a range of national, regional and international organizations. Recognizing the need to increase synergy between efforts to manage and reduce disaster risks and efforts to adapt to climate change and variability, the UNDP Cuba office, together with other country offices in the Caribbean, in 2001 launched the Caribbean Risk Management Network. This brings together national, regional and international stakeholders to promote improved coordination and a more effective use of available resources in favour of small island developing States whose existing high degree of disaster risk will increase markedly as a result of global climate change. A UNDP expert group meeting, held in Havana in June 2002, called for an integrated approach to risk management based on strengthening national capacity to deal with existing and future risks and both rapid-onset and slow-impact climatic events.

15. In central and south-western Asia, UNDP launched a subregional initiative in 2001 with an international seminar hosted by the Islamic Republic of Iran and that brought together representatives of Governments and United Nations agencies from Afghanistan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to document and promote innovative approaches to managing and reducing drought risk in the region. In Central America, UNDP is working with the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America to document successful approaches to building local capacity for disaster reduction and to improve national legislative and administrative systems.

16. In the field of risk-reduction education, the United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme, managed by UNDP, has continued to provide its services to both the United Nations system and Member States, especially disaster-prone developing countries. Following inter-agency assessments and dedicated workshops, a comprehensive plan for Central America for 2002-2004 was developed and preparations for country workshops in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama were begun. The United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme, in cooperation with the Southern African Development Community, designed a plan for southern Africa for 2002-2005, which is being completed with inter-agency support. National workshops were held in Georgia and Nepal, while

inter-agency programming for future initiatives has started in Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Romania and the Balkans, as well as in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste. The Programme has also launched a database of disaster risk-reduction training programmes and resources that are available internationally.

17. In the context of the United Nations system, UNDP is also strengthening and further defining its areas of collaboration with both the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction secretariat in order to ensure a coherent system-wide approach to disaster reduction issues. In 2002, UNDP began deploying five senior regional disaster reduction advisers to support national and subregional capacity-building efforts in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Arab States. They will work in close cooperation with the regional disaster response advisers and outposts of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction secretariat to ensure a coordinated system approach to working with national and regional partners.

V. Supporting post-disaster recovery efforts

18. To avoid an uncontrolled rise in vulnerability, especially in those developing countries affected by recurring disasters, the relief phase must be followed immediately by another post-disaster recovery stage where longer-term considerations of recovery, development and vulnerability management inform the design of dedicated strategies and plans. As recommended by the General Assembly in paragraph 3 of its resolution 56/103, this stage must include legislative and other appropriate measure to mitigate the effects of future disasters. These should include disaster reduction measures in line with the principles of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

19. If opportunities are grasped effectively, post-disaster recovery can break the vicious cycle of unsustainable development and disaster risk and lay the foundations for sustainable recovery that addressed the direct and indirect causes and trigger factors of disaster. Since 2000, UNDP has been pioneering an approach to post-disaster recovery that consists in providing support to local-level recovery processes immediately after a disaster and in integrating risk and vulnerability reduction considerations into all recovery activities. In this way, early recovery efforts can catalyse the transition to more sustainable development. This approach to post-disaster recovery has the potential to close the gap between emergency relief and sustainable recovery and break the downward spiral that can lead to unsustainable development, poverty, rising social tensions and environmental hazards.

20. In 2001, UNDP developed post-disaster recovery strategies and frameworks following the major earthquakes in El Salvador, Gujarat (India) and Peru, as well as following flash floods in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hurricane Michelle in Cuba, the volcanic eruption in Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo), floods in Senegal, hailstorms and flash floods in Bolivia and earthquakes in Afghanistan and Georgia. Those strategies and frameworks have enabled UNDP to further refine its approach and to develop systems and mechanisms, with the support of the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that make predictable and consistent results possible. This includes creating a smooth interface between United Nations disaster assessment

and coordination teams and UNDP recovery teams as well as the creation of rosters of recovery experts.

21. In support of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Inter-Agency Task Force, UNDP has chaired the Working Group on risk, vulnerability and disaster impact assessment, which has led to increased international collaboration on the development of risk and vulnerability indicators and indices as well as the development and implementation of proposals to improve the consistency, accuracy and coverage of disaster impact data. The Working Group is also working in collaboration with the Task Force to improve climate-related risk information by correlating climate and disaster databases.

22. UNDP has also contributed to a supportive policy framework for disaster risk management by developing policy in areas central to its mandate. At the third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Brussels in May 2001, UNDP presented a disaster profile of the least developed countries focusing international attention on the impact of disasters on national and household economy and chronic poverty. UNDP, with the collaboration of the United Nations Environment Programme Global Resource Information Database and the International Research Institute for Climate Prediction at Columbia University in New York, has also developed a prototype global index of disaster, risk and vulnerability to be included in a world vulnerability report.

VI. Conclusion and recommendations

23. **Major disasters are tragedies, but at the same time they create opportunities by eliminating accumulated risks and therefore open the possibility for recovery and reconstruction. To take full advantage of such opportunities, decision makers would need to ensure that vulnerability reduction elements are appropriately mainstreamed into developmental plans in order to help mitigate the effects of future disasters. The inclusion of vulnerability reduction measures is also a crucial element that would support and sustain the transition from relief to development. Special attention must also be paid to ensure that development practices do not exacerbate inequalities within societies and perpetuate the poverty trap by leaving the poor with land that is more at risk when natural disasters such as floods or landslides occur.**

24. **The role of international organizations in the transition from relief to development is also crucial. Concerned organizations and programmes are working to ensure that risk-reduction criteria are reflected in their existing planning tools and that national and local governments are supported with respect to their capacity to deal with disaster risk reduction as well as response and recovery. However, more needs to be done to strengthen and further clarify areas of collaboration within and between organizations to ensure that a coherent system-wide approach to disaster management becomes the norm.**

25. **The General Assembly may wish:**

(a) **To encourage Member States and the United Nations system to strengthen their efforts to effectively take advantage of post-disaster situations by introducing vulnerability reduction measures into recovery plans, thereby reducing further risks and laying the foundation for sustainable development;**

(b) To strengthen cooperation between Member States and the United Nations system to increase understanding among decision makers of the critical links between disaster reduction principles and longer-term development planning;

(c) To support efforts to include risk analysis and reduction measures in development planning at the local, national and international levels;

(d) To reiterate the importance of strengthening legislative and other appropriate measures to mitigate the effects of disasters;

(e) To build upon the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction process to review disaster reduction initiatives and to encourage the United Nations to continue its efforts to document successful approaches to building national, regional and international mitigation capacity for possible inclusion in the Central Register of Disaster Management Capacities;

(f) To support the efforts of the United Nations system to develop the Directory of Advanced Technologies for Disaster Response.